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PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHNR #1907/01 1231059  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 031059Z MAY 07  
FM AMEMBASSY NAIROBI  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9422  
INFO RUEHDS/AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA 9288  
RUEHDR/AMEMBASSY DAR ES SALAAM 5255  
RUEHDJ/AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI 4685  
RUEHKM/AMEMBASSY KAMPALA 2025  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 2231  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 2188  
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RHMFIUU/CJTF HOA

UNCLAS NAIROBI 001907

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [KE](#)

SUBJECT: NURTURING DEMOCRACY -- AMBASSADOR'S VISIT TO  
NYANZA AND WESTERN PROVINCES

REF: A. NAIROBI 1830

[1](#)B. NAIROBI 321

[1](#)C. NAIROBI 1789

[1](#)D. NAIROBI 1603

[1](#)1. Summary. During a four-day trip to Nyanza and Western Provinces (in western Kenyan), the Ambassador talked with a wide cross-section of Kenyans about the state of democracy in the country, and about the importance of an inclusive, fair, and transparent electoral process. Although rich in resources, these areas have been marginalized due to the region's long-standing identification with opposition politics. Ordinary Kenyans, elected officials, and career civil servants nevertheless acknowledged that there has been significant democratic progress since the 2002 elections. Town hall meetings with thousands of Kenyans provided unique opportunities for discussion. Regardless of their political or ethnic affiliations, people are enthusiastic about the national elections set for later this year. As demonstrated during town hall meetings with university students, youth are an emerging force that will accelerate the pace of change. Tribalism, however, remains a dominant factor in politics. U.S. engagement through development programs, PEPFAR, the Centers for Disease Control, and Walter Reed is having a substantial impact to combat poverty, HIV/AIDS, and malaria (with Nyanza having the highest rates). The Ambassador also delivered the U.S. message with respect to the elections and the U.S.-Kenyan partnership during media interviews. The Ambassador called on Senator Obama's grandmother, who is doing well at her home in Siaya, Nyanza. End summary.

[1](#)2. The Ambassador, accompanied by a small Mission team, visited Nyanza and Western provinces during April 22-25. The purposes were familiarization; to take the pulse of these politically important communities in the lead-up to the national elections at the end of this year; and to deliver a clear message to all interlocutors regarding the need for a transparent, fair, and inclusive electoral process.

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Rich, but Poor - the Impact of Marginalization  
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[1](#)3. With the long rains underway, these provinces were richly green and their agricultural potential was evident. The region has other important resources, particularly Lake Victoria. However, the lushness of the countryside and beauty of the Lake - showcased during a long cruise on a 30 year old ferry - belie the fact that Nyanza is one of the poorest areas of Kenya, with the country's highest provincial

rates of poverty, HIV/AIDS, and malaria. The Luo and Kisii communities dominate Nyanza province, while the Luhya dominate Western province. Opposition politician Raila Odinga, a Luo, has virtually complete Luo support. The Luhya and Kisii often act as swing voters, but the Luhya are not monolithic. (Ref A) Marginalization of Nyanza began soon after independence when Kenya's first President broke with then Vice President and prominent Luo leader Oginga Odinga. Nyanza's estrangement from the central government continued when the Odinga political dynasty led the Luo to closely identify with opposition politics which continues to this day. (Ref B and C) Western and Nyanza provinces are largely Christian, although mosques are occasionally seen, as well as a Hindu temple in Kisumu, reflecting the significant South Asian origins of the population there. These provinces have generally not been affected by the kind of tribal clashes that have plagued other areas. A visit to the memorial on Rusinga Island to Tom Mboya, a prominent trade unionist and opposition politician who was assassinated in 1969, testifies to the history of political violence in Kenya (despite the fact that there have been no coups and the country has proved to be one of the most stable in Africa).

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Evidence of Change -  
Meetings with Government and Elected Officials  
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14. Meetings with government officials in Nyanza and Western provinces demonstrated something that one tends to find throughout Kenya: a fairly striking degree of professionalism and competence, and an apparent appreciation of their responsibilities in the country's still new democracy. The administrators are part of the career civil

service and are generally not from the areas in which they are assigned. The assistant district commissioner for Kisii district (Nyanza province), for example, emphasized the importance of combating tribalism. He talked about the government's efforts to register voters. He also noted that the government is following through on the commitment President Kibaki announced last fall to ensure that women represent one-third of all new government hires. One hundred of three hundred provincial and district officers appointed in January are women, he said. He acknowledged the cultural bias against the participation of women in politics, but said that the government is committed to overcoming this traditional discrimination. He asked for support for efforts to combat female genital mutilation.

15. In Kakamega the provincial commissioner for Western province also discussed efforts to combat tribalism. He was particularly focused on this given the proximity of the violence occurring in the Mt. Elgon area. (Ref D) On a more positive note, he was justifiably proud of the government's efforts to preserve 14,000 hectares of Kakamega forest, the last remaining tropical rain forest in Kenya. The assistant district commissioner of Vihiga district (Western Province) is focused on empowering women and echoed the statements of the other officials on their responsibility to ensure a fair and transparent electoral process.

16. The deputy provincial commissioner for Nyanza province in Kisumu, the capital of Nyanza, was a particularly impressive woman. She described government training she had received that emphasized the need to see citizens as customers who must be dealt with fairly regardless of their tribal affiliation. "The distinction between government and politics is something new since 2002," she said. Elected mayors in the region sounded similar notes. The mayor of Kakamega is from the governing NARC coalition, but the city councilors represent different parties.

17. In a Nyanza constituency, the government is in the middle of an intense road-building effort in order to bolster the election prospects for Foreign Minister Tuju, a Luo who has been loyal to the government, despite his LDP colleagues (and

fellow Luos) falling out with the government. The fact that he has been able to deliver may well get him re-elected to Parliament, despite wide-spread Luo support for the opposition. The female mayor of Kisumu, an opposition stronghold, was harsher about the government's intentional marginalization of her city. She was nevertheless optimistic that Kenyan democracy will move in a positive direction, and confidently predicted the election of the first woman president in 2018. The Roman Catholic bishop of Nyanza also maintained that there has been significant positive change in Kenya since the 2002 elections. He sees indications that Kenyans are becoming more aware of the pitfalls of tribal politics.

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Town Hall Meetings - Ordinary Kenyans Speak Out  
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¶18. The Ambassador held a number of town hall-style meetings with ordinary Kenyans. A consistent theme in these discussions was the determination of Kenyan voters to participate in the electoral process. Market ladies, encountered during a walk through Kisumu's main market, said that they were registered to vote and planning "to vote for a change." Despite the perceived shortchanging of their communities, most acknowledged that progress has been made since 2002. While some people claimed that they would vote for the best candidate regardless of his tribal affiliation (opposition politician Kalonzo Musyoka's (an ethnic Kamba) name was frequently mentioned), the prevailing impression was that tribal affiliation will be the dominating factor.

¶19. In general, two-thirds or more of those in the town hall meetings claimed to be registered to vote (thus apparently countering claims made by the opposition that Nyanza has been discriminated against in terms of registration because of its opposition sympathies). Even younger participants in the town hall discussions admitted that they would follow a tribal approach to the elections. One young Luo said "whether he can win or not, we must stick with Raila Odinga (the dominant Luo politician and one of the leading

opposition candidates) as the representative of our community." (Note: Ethnic affiliation will continue to influence voters' decisions. There is a pattern of ethnic groups benefiting from over representation in administrations headed by their members, such as the Kikuyu under Presidents Kenyatta and Kibaki and the Kalenjins under Moi. This serves to reinforce the perception by those groups who have not enjoyed the government's largesse that only by electing one of your own to power will a community truly benefit from government attention and distribution of resources. (Ref C) In fact, this lesson was reinforced by Kibaki's perceived betrayal of the Luo community by his failure to honor a pre-election power-sharing agreement which would have benefited the Luo community and the perception that Kibaki's ethnic Kikuyu occupy the choice positions within government and state owned enterprises. Given this backdrop, it is not difficult to understand why many of Kenya's electorate will be swayed by tribal considerations. End note.)

¶10. In a town hall meeting with a group of community leaders on predominately Luo Rusinga Island, in Lake Victoria, they echoed the sentiments expressed in other town hall meetings that the political climate is much more tolerant and open than it was before 2002. While commenting that "tribalism is a killer disease," one elder then lamented "but tribalism is very deep-rooted and may stand in the way of electing a leader with vision." He expected Luos to follow Raila Odinga based on tribal solidarity. The community leaders recognized that expanding education and eradicating poverty are key to diminishing tribalism.

¶11. Community leaders in Kisumu pointed out that the marginalization of the area reinforces tribalism. Although the airport at Kisumu was the first in Kenya, it has been neglected. The road network is in appalling condition (as the U.S. Mission team verified during long drives between

towns). They also tended to confirm that the Kenyan civil service has been more professional since 2002. Industry in Nyanza province has collapsed and Kisumu struggles to survive despite having been designated a Millennium Development City.

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#### Youth and Universities - Harbingers of Change

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¶12. Town hall meetings conducted at two universities were extremely positive events that reaffirmed hope about the future of democracy in Kenya. Masinde Muliro University in Kakamega focuses on science and technology. A Peace Corps volunteer helps a Kenyan NGO that is assisting with computer training. A U.S. business has opened a call center on the grounds of the university that now employs 25 people, but is planned to expand to 1,000. In the town hall meetings with Kenyans, they initially had to be coaxed to speak up. One observer explained that this was due to the fact that they were not accustomed to having such give-and-take exchanges with officials. By contrast, university students enthusiastically participated, demonstrating in the process the generational transition that will accelerate change in Kenya. In a town hall meeting with 150 students, many emphasized the need to focus on a vision for the nation that rises above tribalism. The students represented a broad cross-section of Kenya's ethnic communities. The majority pointed to empty promises by those who had been elected in 2002 and expressed support for the opposition. Similar sentiments were expressed at Maseno University, near Kisumu, during a very lively town hall meeting with over 1,000 students, some which was covered on national television. The students talked about lack of progress on corruption, the challenge of tribalism, and the lack of government action in key economic areas. The students were very well-informed, asking questions, among others, on UNSC reform, climate change, the World Bank, and the role of the Kenyans resident in the U.S.

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#### U.S. and Other Donor Engagement

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¶13. A common theme in many encounters was the predictable request for assistance. Yet, at the same time, there was an appreciation for the tremendous amount that the U.S. is already doing and a realistic acknowledgment that resources are limited. Visits to a number of projects testified to the

scope of U.S. involvement. Several Ambassador's Self-Help Fund projects are improving communities and empowering women's groups, including one that has increased access to drinking water and one that has assisted with start-up of a poultry feed production business. The Department of Agriculture is implementing a USD 4 million Title II monetization project that is helping hundreds of farmers increase production and earnings through collective marketing. Nearby, USAID is implementing a famine relief cassava cultivation project. The U.S. is engaged in a myriad of other activities including, for example, helping support development of an ice factory along Lake Victoria to facilitate the marketing of fish.

¶14. The World Bank and various donors are also heavily engaged in Nyanza province. The Mission team visited one of the Millennium Challenge Villages, an off-shoot of the UN's Millennium Development Goals. The village is a conglomeration of homesteads in an area called Sauri that encompasses about 60,000 people. The project is supported by Columbia University's Earth Institute headed by Jeffrey Sachs, and by the Millennium Promise Foundation supported by Gates and Soros. The village is achieving yields of between 5 and 6 metric tons of maize per hectare, contrasted with an average of 2 tons in the rest of the country. Support for the village is based on a holistic development concept, so health, education, agriculture, water, and infrastructure are all targeted.

¶15. Evidence of the extensive U.S. efforts to fight HIV/AIDS through PEPFAR and related programs was everywhere. Numerous voluntary counseling and testing centers were seen as well as awareness advertisements. The Peace Corps is supporting a Kenyan NGO involved in sexual and reproductive health education that reaches about 6,000 young people. The large presence of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Walter Reed, both based in Kisumu, is greatly appreciated by the population. PEPFAR is supporting a CDC program focused on sexual education of parents with young children. CDC, which has been in Kisumu since 1979, works in partnership with the Kenya Medical Research Institute. CDC and Walter Reed efforts are having a major impact in the fight against HIV/AIDS and malaria. Walter Reed is supporting a newly established pediatric wing of Kisumu hospital. The Gates and Path foundations, and several American universities are also involved. A private New Hampshire group has provided medical equipment. A number of U.S. museums and organizations are supporting the museum in Kisumu, which houses rare artifacts and rare species from Lake Victoria. This reflects the tremendous involvement of U.S. non-government institutions throughout Kenya, testifying to the breadth of the U.S.-Kenyan partnership.

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Media - Getting Out the Message  
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¶16. The Ambassador had ample opportunity to get out U.S. messages, as national media showed up to cover a number of events during the trip. They appeared fortuitously at the town hall meeting with the Maseno University students just at the moment when the Ambassador was telling the students they should insist on opportunities to ask candidates tough questions through town hall meetings and debates (which have not been hallmarks of Kenyan democracy). The Ambassador did interviews with local radio stations and took call-in questions.

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The American Community  
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¶17. The trip also provided an opportunity to conduct a town hall meeting with the large American community in Kisumu. The Ambassador informed the Americans about U.S. engagement with Kenya and our priorities in the country and the region.

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Comment  
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¶18. That people who have suffered in some of the poorest areas of Kenya would nevertheless acknowledge progress made since 2002 and be enthusiastic about the electoral process

testifies to the strength of Kenyan democracy. Even in these marginalized areas, access to education has expanded and people feel free to speak out. Though unaccustomed to town hall meetings, ordinary Kenyans quickly warmed to the opportunities to exchange ideas, hopefully something that they will insist upon with candidates running for office. Kenyans heard a clear message on the need for an inclusive, fair, and transparent electoral process, and on the counter-productive nature of tribal politics. The democratic space opened during the past five years and the beginning of generational change are slowly altering the face of Kenyan politics, but whether this will have much impact in diminishing the prominence of tribalism in elections this year remains to be seen. The visit, however, left no doubt that Kenya is moving in a positive direction.  
RANNEBERGER